The cinema hall as a place to sell Eskimo Pie

This chapter addresses the question of how, today, to start reading that rich book that is Marx’s *Capital* – of which an immense, even monstrous, accumulation of commentary on the Marxist mode of literary production appears to have already shaped its elementary forms. In reading *Capital*, if anything about beginnings should be considered necessary, it is usual to say it is good to start at the beginning – not always of course, but usually to start with what is immediately at hand. Commentaries, primers, prefaces, intros, first sentences and first chapters start at the beginning and continue on from there. This is itself debated, but my argument is that we can only approach *Capital* through the already existing commentary, even as we would like to start as if the book were new. And the commentary that exists is not only that which is explicitly marked as such, but also includes all the ideas we have already received about so many things – about Marx, capitalism, communism, exchange, commodities and so much more. A vast accumulation of things filter reading, so it would be naive to simply say that materialism might start with things themselves, even if it makes sense to start with commodities, the objects that are the souvenirs or detritus of our lives.

The key to the beginning of volume one is where Marx starts with ‘a monstrous accumulation of commodities’ [‘ungeheure Warenansammlung’ – translation modified by author], but there are many possible starts and many people don’t get much further than chapter one, or they take chapter one as the ‘proper’ beginning. I want to suggest that there is something more here and so want to begin with something else, or even someone else, who might seem the total antithesis of the celebrated critic of the commodity system. A monstrous figure to expose the workings of
monstrosity all the more (the monstrous will be explained). My reading is angular, so I choose a character from a parallel history of commerce, although glossed through a film. I have in mind William Randolph Hearst – Moneybags – portrayed by Orson Welles in the classic film *Citizen Kane*. In this chapter, I want to develop this as an introduction to *Capital*, through its incarnation in the figure of Moneybags Kane, and to begin to get at commodities through a focus on the kind of obscure, miniature, almost irrelevant and insignificant objects to hand – those baubles and trinkets that mesmerise Kane, and us all.

When you watch *Citizen Kane*, you will be well aware from the start that Kane collects. Collection itself has a problematic philosophical heritage, chastised even by Nietzsche:

> Witness the repugnant spectacle of a blind lust for collection [...] Man envelops himself in the odour of decay [...] often he sinks so low as finally to be satisfied with any fare and devours with pleasure even the dust of bibliographical quisquilia. (Nietzsche 1980: 21)

I have been reading Marx in the cinema. Reading in the dark, to emphasise sensitivities. To read this way is to tamper with another accumulation that seems a dull dead half-life of narrative: the spectral forms of celluloid, politics and critique that surround the film *Citizen Kane*. Orson Welles might be a good choice for an illustration in *Marx at the Movies* because like that other famous old beard, Welles insists on being both actor and director, at the same time working to a script and writing that script. Marx is famous for saying something similar in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* – we make our own history but not in conditions that we have chosen (Marx 2002: 19). Perhaps this is like rewriting a script as a means to combat studio control. In the making of *Citizen Kane* Welles started out shooting ‘screen tests’ so the studio would not interfere with his shooting schedule, and in the first weeks he had already begun, started before the start, so to speak. A feint. Later, there will be reason for dress-ups and farcical returns aplenty when we ask after the status of allegories about those who are (mis)represented by opportunists with pretentions to power.

I will suggest that the idea of Marx at the movies has something of prophecy about it. In the preface and in the main text of *Capital*, Marx twice quotes Horace: ‘*Mutato nomine de te fabula narratur*’ (Marx 1970: 267). This translates as ‘the names are changed but the joke is told of you’. In the preface this is a message to the German workers, warning that this story of Capital in England presages coming events